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## ON THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

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Many attempts have been made to trace the development of religion, and anthropologists and historians have often been led by their respective methods to widely different solutions of the problem. A survey of the literature during the last decade shows us that great progress has been made, and that uncertainty has been succeeded by certainty and evidence.

Heretofore the study of religion has been exclusively the task of theology, but it is quite clear that this science could never reach a scientific conclusion, because it summarily presupposed, what should first be proven, the existence of a superhuman being, averring that "*religion* has been communicated to man by the revelation of God himself." This condition, however, has changed since history, ethnology, and anthropology have advanced, and since important discoveries and researches in these sciences have overthrown a system which has been for a long time tottering to a fall. I think that in modern times every really scientific work will treat the question from an evolutionary standpoint only. The comparative study of the rites, cults, and myths of primitive peoples has greatly improved the state of the science of today as contrasted with what it was twenty years ago.

An inquiry into the life and thought of native races is difficult: 1, from the confusion of ideas which most investigators have when they try to throw light upon the religious beliefs of the races they desire to study; 2, from dogmatic prejudice, especially of missionaries, who class as "*religion*" only what corresponds to their catechism; 3, from the generally insufficient knowledge of the languages of primitive races possessed by the investigator, and the fear of natives to speak about "*religious things*" to the white man. In the present article, however, it is not my intention to give a complete list of all the efforts made by learned scholars to determine the origin of religion. I shall only mention the theories of the most prominent ones, in so far as they treat the question by the methods of the true science of man—anthropology.

By far the most important work for the study of the religious beliefs of primitive peoples is E. B. Tylor's "Primitive Culture." Speaking of the primitive forms of religious belief, he says: "By requiring in this definition the belief in a supreme deity or in judgment after death, the adoration of idols or the practice of sacrifice or other partially diffused doctrines or rites, no doubt many tribes may be excluded from the category of religious; but as such narrow definition has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them, it seems best to fall back at once on this essential source, and simply to claim as a minimum definition of religion *the belief in spiritual beings*."<sup>1</sup> This, according to Tylor, is the germ of religion.

Besides Tylor, Julius Lippert, in Germany, showed in many of his works that the root of all historic development of religion will be found in the *worship of the soul*.<sup>2</sup>

The third in line is Herbert Spencer. Supporting the theory of his countryman, F. B. Tylor, he concludes that ancestor worship is the origin of religion. He says: "Using the phrase ancestor worship in its broadest sense, as comprehending all worship of the dead, be they of the same blood or not, we conclude that *ancestor worship* is the root of every religion."<sup>3</sup> This was written in December, 1875. Later on, speaking again concerning the religious idea, he says: "We get from this kinship of beliefs among races remote in time, space, and culture, strong warrant for the inference that *ghost-propitiation* is the origin of all religions."<sup>4</sup>

A profound examination of these three theories shows that they have a certain connection. Lippert's book on soul worship makes no mention of Spencer's view, as shown in the first volume of his "Principles of Sociology," although the latter was published several years before. The theories of ancestor and soul worship have been widely accepted, and it is rare to find a scientific book treating of this subject which is not based upon them.

Besides these theories, briefly described, comparative mythology throws another light upon this important question. Its

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<sup>1</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. I, p. 424.

<sup>2</sup> F. Lippert, *Der Seelenkult in seinen Beziehungen zur althebräischen Religion*, 1881; *Die Religionen der europäischen Kulturvölker*. Berlin, 1881.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, vol. I, p. 422.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 7.

principal exponents in America are Major J. W. Powell and Dr Daniel G. Brinton; in Germany, Adolf Bastian.

Dr Brinton, in his last publication,<sup>1</sup> gives a very good picture of the religions of primitive peoples in general, but I have sought in vain for his opinion as to the *origin* of religion. He well says: "This universal postulate, the psychic origin of all religious thought, is the recognition, or, if you please, the assumption, that conscious volition is the ultimate source of all force. It is the belief that behind the sensuous, phenomenal world, distinct from it, giving it form, existence, and activity, lies the ultimate, invisible, immeasurable power of mind, of conscious will, of intelligence, analogous in some way to our own; and—mark this essential corollary—that *man is in communication with it.*" But this is more a philosophical definition of primitive religious belief and does not show *how* man came to believe in an "invisible, immeasurable power."

Another work worthy of mention, based upon the comparative method, is A. Lang's "Myth, Ritual, and Religion," 1887. Lang shows in this book that the religious ideas and beliefs of the peoples of antiquity have their parallel today among living primitive peoples, and he tries to prove that the religions of antiquity are nothing but the survival of an original wild state. He says: "Our theory is, therefore, that the savage and senseless element in mythology is, for the most part, a legacy from ancestors of the civilized races who were once in an intellectual state not higher, but probably lower, than that of Australians, Bushmen, Red Indians, the lower races of South America, and other worse than barbaric peoples."<sup>2</sup>

The theory of Andrew Lang, however, is not new, and he himself admits that similar doctrines were advanced long before by Eusebius the neoplatonist, Spencer (president of Corpus Christi College, 1630–1693), and in the last century by Fontanelle and de Brosses, the well-known author of the fetish theory. Tylor, McLennan, and Mannhardt may be mentioned here in the same connection. The most original feature of the theory of Lang is that he has more completely brought to an issue the comparison of the mythologies of antiquity with those of primitive peoples.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel G. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive Peoples*, 1897, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> A. Lang, *Myth, Ritual, and Religion*, p. 31 of the English edition.

In my opinion the theory of André Lefèvre, professor of anthropology in Paris, is much deeper and more logical. He is neither an adherent of the theory of soul worship nor of the origin of religion from the perceptions of death, which primitive man himself made. He says: "Man lived during several geological periods before he cared for his dead fellows. This inferiority is not astonishing—ants and gorillas *had finished* their development, man *began* his own. . . . Abandonment [of the dead] was everywhere the primitive form of sepulture, and it is still employed; only it must be adapted to the respective religious beliefs, and takes on a liturgic character."<sup>1</sup> The lowest form of religion, according to Lefèvre, is not animism, but "anthropism." He means by this word the endeavor of man "to attribute to all surrounding beings, objects and phenomena, forces and abilities analogous to our own."<sup>2</sup>

This is, briefly sketched, the present state of the research. However interesting all these theories may be, however much light they may shed upon the religious life of primitive and civilized peoples, the question, How did primitive man obtain conceptions that we call "religious"? is *not* solved. Before even the simplest myths can be formed by a people at a very low stage of civilization, a long cultural development is necessary, and this proves that the above-mentioned theories do not afford a sufficient explanation of the origin of religion, since the formation of the conception of a "soul"—whether thought of as a "breath," "spirit," or "double of the man"—presupposes a very advanced mental development, which certainly cannot be ascribed to primitive man.

I shall attempt to solve the question from quite another standpoint. All the investigators in this field, without exception, have neglected one principal factor in their respective researches, *the economic conditions*; they all have assigned to primitive man qualities which he could not have possessed. It is therefore necessary to consider the primitive economic conditions of man and to see if we find there any basis from which we can deduce the primitive forms of religion.

The life of primitive man turned primarily upon the satisfaction of his temporal needs; the care for his own life absorbed

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<sup>1</sup> A. Lefèvre, *La Religion*, Paris, 1892, p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169; preface, p. xxxi.

his entire mental forces, originally very weak and but little developed. Only then, when the "struggle for existence," the battle with surrounding nature, and the gradually developing language caused him to invent words for the objects around him, which enlarged his intellectual horizon; only then, when his nomadic life was succeeded by residence in a place where nature gave him her rich gifts in greater abundance and made easier their acquirement; only then, when man possessed property, attaching him to the soil; only then did man think of his companions, and then the bud "religion" could develop into the flower.

Before man arrived at this turning point in his mental development he had peopled the globe for thousands of years. *Primitive man had no religion.* This was the product of much later times, and did not arise from a so-called "religious sentiment," which many investigators insist on attributing to primitive man, misconceiving the actual circumstances of his condition.

Hoernes is therefore in error in attributing religion to primitive man, saying: "As we cannot conceive of a speechless primitive man, so we are not authorized to think that the man of the earliest times was without religion. Religious sentiment belongs to the primitive mind of mankind."<sup>1</sup> In a similar sense Schäffle says: "In primitive hordes religious life will be found; but the cult of a perception of the world and of the moral sense of religion we find extremely imperfect in the horde."<sup>2</sup> If we would attribute religion to primitive man this would mean, in other words, that he had brought religion with him on earth, and religion must have developed gradually as man developed, an assertion that is clearly nonsense.

Whatever we may think of the condition of primitive men, it is certainly true that they were united in hordes which, being without natural arms and weapons, obtained their force from solidarity, as opposed to the disorganized state of animals. This life, based upon mutual assistance, produced in earlier times a system of social virtues or, in other words, a primitive social morality; but this has nothing to do with religious perceptions.

These primitive laws of morality were based in their simplest forms upon the furtherance of public welfare, upon the further-

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<sup>1</sup> M. Hoernes, *Urgeschichte der Menschheit*, 1895 (collect. Göschen), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> M. Schäffle, *Bau & Leben des socialen Körpers*, 2. ed., 1896, vol. II, p. 424.

ance of the welfare of the members of the same tribe, and upon the effort to ameliorate economic conditions. It becomes clear that a man who during his life has devoted himself to the welfare of his tribal companions was not forgotten after his death. We see evidence of this from the earliest historical times to the present, and in the so-called primitive races as well as in civilized nations, the "benefactors of mankind" are never forgotten, and their memory is kept from generation to generation with "adoration and worship."

We may illustrate this by some examples. So François says concerning the religion of the Herero in Africa, "Only one thing touches our sympathies: the metaphysical carrying out of the fourth commandment—that is to say, ancestor worship. The grave of the father is the most important of all the sacred places, the soul of the father the most frequently consulted oracle. *Especially sacred is, of course, the tomb of a great chief.* . . . Here the chief of the tribe kneels down to ask advice in important political affairs, to explain miscarried undertakings, to deprecate the anger of the soul of the father or of the ancestor of the tribe, or to ask approval of new plans."<sup>1</sup> In the prayer of the Bushmen we see a thankful recognition of benefits rendered. They pray to Cäge, who has created all things: "O Cäge, Cäge, are we not your children? Don't you see our hunger? Give us to eat!" After this prayer he gives "both hands full;"<sup>2</sup> and of the Zulu, the most marked ancestor worshippers, Tylor says: "Their worship of the manes of the dead has not only made the clan ancestors of a few generations back into tribal deities (Unkulunkulu), but beyond these, too far off and too little known for actual worship, yet recognized as the original race deity and identified with the Creator, *stands the First Man*, he who 'broke off in the beginning,' the Old, Old One, the great Unkulunkulu." And further on he says: "At the first we saw that we were made by Unkulunkulu; but when we were ill we did not worship him, nor ask anything of him. We worshipped those whom we had seen with our eyes, their death and their life among us."<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to see, from this simple and clear confession, how these prayers originate from purely economic conditions, and

<sup>1</sup> François, *Nama und Damara*, Madgebourg, 1896, pp. 192, 193.

<sup>2</sup> Ratzel, *Völkerkunde*, vol. I, p. 78; Lang, *Myths*, etc., p. 330.

<sup>3</sup> Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. II, p. 313.

that they have for their object the granting of a life free from care. Furthermore, a prayer is mentioned from the Khonds of Orissa (India) which, like that of the Sulu, contains no metaphysical conceptions and expresses only purely materialistic desires. Thus Tylor cites: "O Boora Pennu! and O Tari Pennu! and all other gods [naming them]. You, O Boora Pennu! created us, giving us the attribute of hunger; thence cornfood was necessary to us, and thence were necessary producing fields. You gave us every seed, and ordered us to use bullocks, and to make plows, and to plow. *Had we not received this art*, we might still indeed have existed upon the natural fruits of the jungle and the plain, but in our destitution we could not have performed your worship. Do you, remembering this—*the connection between our wealth and your honor*—grant the prayers which we now offer. In the morning we rise before the light to our labor, carrying the seed. Save us from the tiger, and the snake, and the stumbling blocks. Let the seed appear earth to the eating birds, and stones to the eating animals of the earth. . . . From the first time, we have lived by your favor. Let us continue to receive it. Remember that the increase of our produce is the increase of your worship, and that its diminution must be the diminution of your rites."<sup>1</sup>

The Tlingits of British Columbia, too, have their tribal hero, Yehl, who gave them the first instructions in the amelioration of their condition of life, in the same way as the Zuñi have their Poshai-an-k'ia. Both of these continue to live as tribal gods, and bring fortune and benefit to their successors. An infinity of other examples might be cited.

If we now turn to the oldest historical peoples, we find the same facts. I refer in this regard to the testimony of the French Egyptologist Maspero, a savant of undisputed authority. He writes: "When the Egyptians of the Pharaonic epoch wished to explain their admiration of a person or of an object, they said, Nothing similar has been seen since the time of Ra. . . . Ra resided in the oldest part of the temple of Heliopolis, which bore the name of *Haït Sorou*, castle of the prince, and was considered as his palace. His court was composed of gods and goddesses, visible like himself. Some people belonged to this household that were intrusted with minor occupations, preparing the food,

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<sup>1</sup> Tylor, *loc. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 365, 369.



accepting the offerings of subjects, or guarding the linen. It was said that Ofroumaou, the head priest of Ra; Hanskistit, the priestess, and in general all the servants of the temple, were descended from these first 'divine household servants' or had succeeded them in direct line."<sup>1</sup> When at last Ra had grown old "his bones became silver, his flesh gold, and his hair lapis-lazuli. He then left his people and retired into the sky, giving them, before leaving, information of all that would occur in future times, the bond between him and men." Osiris and Isis, too, may be considered as teachers and benefactors of mankind. "Osiris taught them [the Egyptians] the art of making agricultural implements, the plow and the hatchet; the art of dividing corn fields and of cultivating corn, barley, and vines. Isis weaned them from anthropophagy, cured them with medicine or sorcery, united women with men in legitimate marriage, and showed them how to grind corn between two flat stones for the purpose of making bread. She invented, in common with her sister Nephthys, the art of weaving, and was the first who wove and bleached linen. *The cult of the gods did not yet exist. Osiris established it*, designed the offerings, regulated the ceremonies, settled the texts, and composed the liturgies. He built cities. Some said Thebes itself; others declared that he was born there."<sup>2</sup> Concerning the gods of Syria, the distinguished author speaks in a similar way. He says: "The gods of Syria are, like those of Egypt and the lands of the Euphrates, feudal princes, who equal in number to the independent states, are cantoned over the ground. Every nation, every tribe, every city adored its chief, Adonai, or master, Baal, who was designated with a special title to distinguish him from the 'masters' of the neighborhood, 'Baalim.' So the Baal who resided in Zeboub was the master of Zeboub, Baal-Zeboub; that of Hermon called himself now Baal-Hermon, now Baal-Gad, the master of Gad," etc.<sup>3</sup> It is well known that the fundamental basis of the religion of Greece and Rome is an economic one, so that I simply refer to the literature of the subject.

These examples are probably sufficient, and I think I have shown that the germ of primitive religions and of religion prop-

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<sup>1</sup> Maspero, *Histoire ancienne*, vol. I, pp. 160, 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> Maspero, *loc. cit.*, vol. II, p. 154.

erly so called lies deeper than the worship of ancestors and of souls. These institutions are indeed primitive *forms* of religion, but not the original form, the earliest form. It is true we are not yet able *today* to prove conclusively for *all* primitive peoples that their religious ideas have grown from economic sources, but this is a natural result of the nature of the inquiry. Every ethnologist knows how incomplete our knowledge of primitive religious belief still is and what an amount of work is still to be done in this department of research. The ethnologist, who in most cases stays but a comparatively short time with one people, will very seldom be able to obtain an exhaustive picture of the entire religious life of a people he is observing. Tylor says upon this point: "The ethnological survey of the races of the world tells much; the ethnographical comparison of their condition tells more;"<sup>1</sup> and I want to add that it is precisely these latter that may mislead us in our attempts to determine primitive religious forms. From the mere comparison of myths, the product of an essentially advanced culture, there can, according to my opinion, be no conclusions obtained as to the origin of religion.

I will therefore state the presumptive origin of religion as follows: In every man lives an inclination for the improvement of his condition. Only a few were able to find a way to effect this, and these after their death became "heroes" or "benefactors" of their respective tribes. The veneration they enjoyed during life changed after their death into "ancestor worship," and later on into "soul worship;" so that Lippert is perfectly right when he says that ancestor and soul worship are the beginning of the *historical* evolution of religion. The two forms have produced a mighty influence upon the entire life of a clan or tribe, and I agree with Stade when he speaks concerning the religious beliefs of ancient Israel thus: "It is probable that ancestor worship is by all means the oldest stage of the belief in spiritual beings, and that from this belief originated the primitive conceptions of the state of man after death. Thence it comes that the oldest social divisions of mankind, the family and the gens, have doubtless originated with many peoples from the worship of ancestors."<sup>2</sup> Grosse, too, in his excellent publi-

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<sup>1</sup> Tylor, *loc. cit.*, vol. I, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. I, p. 406.

cation on the primitive family, emphasizes the influence which the worship of ancestors produces upon the foundation and preservation of the family;<sup>1</sup> but this ancestor worship acts at the same time as a mysterious ethical power, so that it represents an educating and ennobling element in public life, and I define religion as the conception man forms of his relations to the superhuman and mysterious powers on which he believes himself to depend; but these powers having arisen from his mental life, and having originated in its economic conditions, the treatment of the question of the origin of religion belongs to the territory of the science of man—to that of anthropology.

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ALASKAN AND HAWAIIAN HAMMERS COMPARED.—The archeologists who are going to make explorations in Alaska should give attention to the curiously formed pestles, or rather hammers, found among the coast Indians of that region. Compare, for instance, the collections in our museums of these hammers with rounded handles, like an old-fashioned flatiron, with a collection of *poi* pounders from the Sandwich islands, in the Ethnographic Museum at Vienna, figured by Ratzel (*Völkerkunde*, vol. II, p. 179). The circular bases with carefully wrought edges, the incurved columnar portion, and the cylindrical and winged grip, in both series, are strikingly indicative of the same authorship.

It is well known that the same Russians—Baranoff and his companions—who settled this part of Alaska were also engaged in trade with the Sandwich islanders and even seized a portion of that archipelago.

It is no argument for the antiquity of these objects in Alaska that they are found with decayed masks in old graves, for in the National Museum there is a skin coat of armor, taken by Lieut. T. Dix Bolles, U. S. N., from a similar burial frame in which all of the wooden objects were nearly destroyed, that is covered entirely with Chinese cash coins and an old rotten mask with large Chinese coins nailed in for eyes. It may be that no one has doubted the common origin of these objects in both places.

O. T. MASON.

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<sup>1</sup> Grosse, *Die Formen der Familie und der Wirtschaft*, 1896, pp. 19, 39, 40.